



“The essence of mindfulness practice is focusing on one thing in the moment.”

Will Baum, LCSW

BLOGS

One Among Many

The self in social context
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

Your inner voice never lies. But does it know what it is talking about?

Will you trust your inner voice?
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One impression I took away from my encounters with the new-age/self-help culture was that there is a widespread and almost unshakeable belief in the veracity of the "inner voice." The idea seems to be that everyone has one, and only one, inner voice that works as a guardian of the person's best interests. When things go wrong, the reason must be that the inner voice was muffled. Perhaps higher cortical areas, less perceptive and less wise than the inner voice, have led the person down the wrong path. Overthinking and overanalyzing, the person has strayed from the authentic self. Another commonly invoked type of departure from the true self is [conformity](#) with the expectations of others. These others may not be

physically around. They could be deceased [parents](#) whose voices were internalized, but they are not authentically "self."

The standard remedy is to get in touch with one's feelings, and that is best accomplished by exercises that corrode [cognition](#). You are asked to feel what's really there, to let go, and to surrender to pure sensation. If you do, the sound of the inner voice will ring loud and clear; all ambivalence and anguish will be gone. You will know what you have to do, and you don't have to worry about future regrets.

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This is a soothing and seductive idea. Wouldn't it be nice if we all had this unerring inner compass? Wouldn't it be nice if all we needed to do is to feel more and think less? I don't see soon-ex President Bush the Younger as a New-Ager, but he did tap into the inner voice mythology, if only for political reasons. He felt in his heart that it was the right thing to go after Saddam Hussein. He really really felt it and he really really believed it (he said). Even from what we know now about what he knew then, his decision to invade was unjustifiable.

I find little support for the idea of the one true inner voice-self in psychological science. Here is a non-exhaustive sample of ideas suggesting that there are many selves and many voices.

1. Hazel Markus introduced the idea of multiple possible selves.
2. Attitude measurement shows that we often feel ambivalently about things, people, and ourselves (look for Johannes Ullrich's work in JPSP, 2008).
3. Cognitive science, evolutionary science, and [neuroscience](#) conceive of the mind-brain as a complex assembly of partly independent but interacting structures, systems, and modules. There is no single and privileged seat of the true self (even [Freud](#) agrees on this one, for heaven's sake).
4. Decision researchers find that preferences (inner voices) are not particularly stable and they are subject to framing and other context effects.

In a brilliant satire of the pop psychology of his day, Luke Rhinehart (1971) has the Diceman say to a psychoanalyst:

"The minority impulses are the Negroes of the [personality](#). They have not enjoyed freedom since the personality was founded: they have become the

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By optimizing our brain function we can all develop these qualities:

Increased memory and concentration

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invisible men. We refuse to recognize that a minority impulse is a potential full man, and until he is granted the same opportunity for development as the major conventional selves, the personality in which he lives will be divided, subject to tensions which lead to periodic explosions and riots."

According to the "Inner-Voice Hypothesis" (IVH), Rhinehart's view is anarchic. Instead, the IVH assumes that there is only one proper path, and that pure emotional experience, freed from intellectual contamination and parental intrusion, is the royal instrument for finding it. One can't go wrong because feelings don't lie. For this to work, it would at least be necessary for the feelings and the voices they raise to be stable over time. But what if they change? Which feeling is the correct one? Likewise, if there are conflicting feelings at a particular point in time, as in the case of attitudinal ambivalence, which feeling ought to be privileged?

The IVH responds to such questions by doubting the depth of the person's devotion to self-discovery. If feelings seem protean or conflicting, it simply shows that the person hasn't fully fathomed the emotional well. Some of the heard voices must be inauthentic (e.g., the voices of internalized parents or other demons). Once the one true voice has been identified, all doubt and confusion will surely vanish.

Note that the IVH is at the same time falsifiable and unfalsifiable. On the one hand, each of the four research results sketched above is sufficient to falsify the IVH by conventional standards. On the other hand, proponents of the IVH may not care about these standards. Whatever evidence for multiple true voices you think you have must be wrong. Probe deeper and you will find the one true IV.

If there is no consensus on falsifiability, what about the IVH's functional utility? Whatever its truth value, does the IVH do any good for those who believe in it? It is trivially true that those who believe the IVH also believe that they benefit from it. There is a psychological gain in the conviction that an awesome decision-maker resides within oneself. Discover this decision-maker, set her (or him) free, and lean back to enjoy the ride. Sounds like you've found God, no?

If, however, you prefer the concept of the jerry-rigged mind, you worry that belief in IVH could do harm. Whichever voice is loudest at any given point in time will be accepted as the true IV. With voices and thus choices changing, incoherences and irrationalities mount (for vivid examples, consult any of Robyn Dawes's books). Any specific inner voice may not be lying, but sometimes it just doesn't know what it's talking about.

Although I think that the case against the IVH case is strong, I do not think this idea will be eradicated any time soon. The jerry-rigged mind refuses to see itself as such. It will continue to project the image of the unitary self. When, from time to time, ambivalences, conflicts, and preference reversals breach the surface of consciousness, believers in the IVH will resume the search for the true voice with renewed vigor.



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